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SE OPINION

HD GRETA THUNBERG IS NOT A PROPHET THE CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVIST IS SIMPLY A CHILD PLEADING FOR FAIRNESS

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She came from obscurity and ignited a global movement. Beginning with a small but persistent act of protest outside the Swedish parliament, she inspired millions to join her. Her fiery speech to the United Nations in September warned of the end of the world. Her unfailing determination and passion make her appear otherworldly, even uncanny, an affect largely attributed to her diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome.

So it's no surprise that many people - along with media outlets like The Irish Times, The Telegraph and The Washington Times - have cast Greta Thunberg as a prophet.

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When Time magazine announced her as "Person of the Year," it continued the trope, using an evocative photograph of Greta standing on a rocky shoreline, staring at the heavens, for the cover.

As a researcher on the history of childhood, I've been disturbed to see Greta described and depicted as a prophet. To me, it risks distorting her message. And it can easily be exploited by climate deniers seeking to counter the appeal of her activism.

Is a climate messiah even necessary?

To some, Greta resembles Joan of Arc, the teenage visionary who led the French army into battle in the 15th century and was later canonized as a saint.

To others, Greta exemplifies the Judeo-Christian tradition of prophets who speak truth to power; according to one Christian blogger, she offers "a prophetic voice to shake us out of our complacency."

Yet presenting Greta as a prophet is deeply misleading. Classically, prophets are messengers who communicate the voice of God. They convey divine revelation that was previously unknown or misunderstood. Ezekiel predicted the destruction and restoration of Jerusalem. Moses received the Ten Commandments. Muhammad revealed the Quran. Prophets, in other words, see truths that others cannot. They bring us messages that often defy human comprehension.

Greta, on the other hand, is simply telling us what we already know. Within the scientific community, there is an overwhelming consensus - going back decades - that humans are causing global warming.

Framing her as a prophet has opened the floodgates to all sorts of messianic theories. This recently took a bizarre turn when a 120-year-old photo with a girl resembling Greta surfaced. Now conspiracy theorists are calling Greta "a time traveler sent to save us."

Depictions like this are fodder for her opponents who dismiss what they call her "doomsday activism." To them, she is a false prophet, and they can portray the people inspired by her as brainwashed cult followers. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians who died alongside his followers in Waco, Texas, in 1993, after all, called himself a prophet. So did Jim Jones, the founder of the Peoples Temple and orchestrator of the 1978 Jonestown Massacre.

To Greta's credit, even she recoils at the idea that she should be viewed as some sort of savior.

"I don't want you to listen to me," she told Congress in September. "I want you to listen to the scientists."

Being a kid carries enough weight

I would argue that the best way to think of Greta is to simply think of her as a child.

This is not demeaning. Far from it. In recent years, young people have offered numerous examples of their ability to exercise independent thought, visionary thinking and leadership.

Melati and Isabel Wijsen were 10 and 12 when they began a successful campaign to ban single-use plastics in their native Bali. Malala Yousafzai was 11 when she began to advocate against the Taliban for girls' right to education. The list goes on: Jazz Jennings, Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, the Parkland activists. Like Greta, they challenge our culture's view of children as powerless and dependent.

Greta memorably began her September U.N. speech with the words, "This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean." As Greta well knows, the fact that a child needs to scold grown-ups to act on an issue that threatens all of humanity is a powerful example of a political system gone horribly wrong.

Even more critically, focusing on Greta's youth highlights a central tenet of her message: fairness. As any parent can tell you, children tend to view the world in terms of moral absolutes - good and bad, right and wrong, fair and unfair. Indeed, researchers have recently shown that expectations of fairness are deeply ingrained in children, appearing in infants as young as 12 months old.

Ideas of fairness underlie many aspects of Greta's message, from her emphasis on how climate change will affect the poor and marginalized, to her comments about how unjust it is to expect young people to fix a catastrophe caused by generations of political inertia. Her forceful call - "How dare you!" - is not the enraged cry of a petulant child. It is the determined statement of a girl who has not yet developed the moral flexibility that is so often the refuge of adult inaction.

Greta is not unraveling the mysteries of our era, or a time traveler sent to stop climate change. Rather, she is a child admonishing selfishness and pleading for fairness.

That's not prophetic. It's common sense.

Ellen Boucher is an associate professor of history at Amherst College. She wrote this for TheConversation.com.

CAPTION: PHOTO: Associated Press: Climate change activist Greta Thunberg speaks Sept. 18 at a House Foreign Affairs Committee subcommittee hearing on climate change on Capitol Hill.

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